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Photographs to Enhance the Exhibits in Writing Portfolios

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Photographs to Enhance the Exhibits in Writing Portfolios

Abstract

Writing portfolios in a third grade classroom were used to more closely relate assessment to students' instructional needs. Photographs of students' involvement in experiences across the curriculum were offered for students to use with their writing. The photographs served to enhance the students' pieces of writing or were used in place of an artifact that was impractical to include in a portfolio. Writing samples related to two thematic units, one in science and the other in social studies, are discussed. Descriptions of the children's writing experiences, photographs that accompany student selected pieces, and students' self-reflections are presented. This portfolio experience indicates that these students used writing to learn in a broader sense. They became more aware of the writing process and used writing functionally in the content areas.

Photographs to Enhance the
Exhibits in Writing Portfolios

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Carol R. Winterboer
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Portfolios

has been approved as meeting the research project requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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Abstract

Writing portfolios in a third grade classroom were used to more closely relate assessment to students' instructional needs. Photographs of students' involvement in experiences across the curriculum were offered for students to use with their writing. The photographs served to enhance the students' pieces of writing or were used in place of an artifact that was impractical to include in a portfolio. Writing samples related to two thematic units, one in science and the other in social studies, are discussed. Descriptions of the children's writing experiences, photographs that accompany student selected pieces, and students' self-reflections are presented. This portfolio experience indicates that these students used writing to learn in a broader sense. They became more aware of the writing process and used writing functionally in the content areas.

Toni Morrison (1996), 1993 Nobel prize winner for literature, has described writing in an elegant, lyrical way in "The Site of Memory"

If writing is thinking
and discovery and selection
and order and meaning,
it is also awe and reverence
and mystery and magic.

Educators, too, are discovering the awe and reverence and mystery and magic of writing as they carefully reexamine their literacy programs. This discovery is, in part, the result of findings from sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and education that have influenced the rethinking of the nature of emerging literacy (Raines, 1995).

For example, the psycholinguist, Frank Smith, (1983) states that if learning is to take place, it must be purposeful and meaningful to the learner. Others collaborate with this idea: Children construct knowledge from within by drawing upon their prior knowledge and experiences rather than having it imposed on them from some outside source (Manning, Manning, Long, & Wolfson, 1987).

Vygotsky's research reveals the social nature of learning (1978). Kenneth Goodman (1992) states that Vygotsky's theory concerning the internalization of social language has helped teachers understand the importance of language interactions in the classroom.

Both educators, Donald Graves (1983) and Marie Clay (1975), have had an enormous impact on changing the view of the writing process. They emphasize that children construct meaning while engaged in the writing process. Clay's research focused on children's knowledge of print and construction of meaning even before they were able to read. Graves researched the writing of young children noting the developmental sequence of invented spelling and the components of the composition process.

While Gary and Maryanne Manning (1995) considered communication to be the main goal of writing, they also viewed writing as a means of constructing knowledge and clarifying one's thinking. Cambourne (1988) expands this view when he explains that writing is not only a medium for communication with others, it is also a means of constructing meaning and bringing order to one's world. Smith (1983) states:

We do not even know what we are capable of thinking unless we begin to manifest ideas in some observable way. When ideas are on paper, we can do more than just contemplate them; we can work on them, mold and manipulate them, and build up a structure of new thought as complex and rich as a picture built upon canvas by an artist who started with little more than a generalized intention.

(p. 80)

Lucy Calkins (1986) notes that children need to write about what is meaningful and real for them. Thus, they need to be encouraged to own their writing experiences by selecting their own topics. When given a choice, children often choose to write personal narratives.

Although choice in topic selection is important, teachers can also offer a learning environment in which children can use language for real purposes that touch their lives directly, or engage in the genuine functions of language. Examples of real purposes might be writing friendly letters, applications to clubs, requests for information, get-well notes, and thank you cards (Manning et al., 1987). Such language experiences integrated into the content areas can nurture the idea that language is a tool to extend thinking (Charlesworth & Lind, 1995; Seefeldt, 1995).

Nancie Atwell (1990) encourages teachers of every discipline to challenge students to think and write like scientists, historians, mathematicians, and literary critics. She encourages students to use writing as a process to discover meaning just as these scholars do when they go about the real, messy business of thinking on paper.

Because writing is a process, the assessment of children's progress and instructional needs in writing need to be described with qualitative techniques (Valencia, 1990). One means is

writing portfolios. This qualitative assessment technique can be a purposeful and systematic means of reflecting on and documenting growth over time, involving student-teacher collaboration and resulting in a close connection of writing with instruction, and assessment (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991). In portfolio collection, teachers can assist students in setting goals, working toward them, reflecting on progress and instructional needs, and then establishing further goals (Valencia, 1990; Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991).

In developing a portfolio collection of writing exhibits, pieces may emerge from experiences in the content fields enhanced by photographs, for example, classroom field trips, guest speakers, or story dramatizations. Also, when a project is too big to keep in the portfolio, a photograph of the artifact can often take its place (Manning & Manning, 1995).

The writer, as a third grade teacher, uses photography as the school year progresses to record her students' involvement in experiences across the curriculum. These photographs are displayed on a table for student examination. The third graders enjoy looking at the photographs of their school activities and frequently are motivated from these visuals to write about an experience.

Many types of writing can be included as exhibits in the portfolios, such as expository and narration pieces, and be

enhanced by photographs. Samples of the students' writing for the portfolios can represent their written responses in thematic units of science and social studies. Examples of my students' writing across the curriculum extended by photographs are given in the following pages.

Social Studies: American Indians

The focus of this unit on American Indians was on the influences of habitat on the cultural elements of various nations. A nation from each of the four geographic regions was studied--northeastern deciduous woodland, the northwestern coniferous forest, the central plains grasslands, and the southwestern desert. By working together in groups of three or four, the students created three dimensional models of each habitat on large pieces of heavy cardboard. Photographs were taken of students working in their groups and presenting their models to other third grade classrooms. Photographs were also taken of guest speakers who shared their American Indian artifacts with the class. The photographs were made available to the students to use with their writing.

One girl wrote about the art media used by her group to depict the village and habitat of a northeastern woodland tribe. She explained how each of the materials had been selected to represent the natural materials that the Iroquois would have used. Her descriptions provided evidence of a clear awareness of

how natural resources influence the lifestyle of the inhabitants while her directions for construction of the village indicated a strong sense of organization. She had used a web to organize her ideas and had made several revisions of her draft. The photograph (see Figure 1) attached to this piece of writing which she placed in her portfolio is of her group with their completed Iroquois village.



Figure 1 Model of Iroquois Village and Habitat

Another girl chose to focus on the lifestyle and customs of the Kwakiutl nation that inhabits the cedar forest of the Pacific Northwest. After locating five or six resources at the public library, she created a web, organizing her information into shelter, clothing, food source, totem poles, potlatch, warriors,

and ceremonies. These seven categories on her web became the headings for her report on the Kwakiutl. A statement from her self-reflection is evidence of this girl's increasing awareness of the process of writing: "I like to write about things I'm learning about in school because it helps me see what I've learned, and it helps me remember what I've learned." A photograph of the Kwakiutl village designed by her group was selected as an exhibit for her portfolio to accompany her report (see Figure 2).



Figure 2 Kwakiutl Village

Students were assisted by the art instructor in constructing totem poles. They were made by gluing jars together and covering them with paper-mache. The students fashioned animal

figures from cardboard, painted them with tempera paint, and glued them to the totem pole base. The totem poles provided an opportunity for students to engage in writing fiction as they composed a family history that a storyteller in a Kwakiutl village might have recited from the figures on a totem pole. A student who chose to create such a story selected a photograph of the totem pole to accompany her piece of writing and then exhibited it in her portfolio (see Figure 3).



Figure 3 Totem Pole Representing Family History

For a portfolio exhibit, another girl chose a thank you letter she had written to one of the guest speakers, a grandfather of one of her classmates. This student had been impressed by the tepee that he had pitched in the outdoor classroom. As the class sat in the tepee, the grandfather shared the music of a wood flute, the legend of the dream catcher, the message of talking feathers, and the power of a medicine wheel. With the letter, she sent a photograph of the experience. To a copy of the letter, she attached another photograph of the grandfather demonstrating how to close the flaps of the tepee. The copy was placed in her portfolio (see Figure 4).



Figure 4 Demonstration of How to Close Teepee Flaps

One boy, in the group that constructed a Cheyenne village and habitat, brought to class a miniature stuffed buffalo that he and his mother had stitched out of fabric scraps. This model represented the sustaining life force of this nation. His classmates' enthusiasm prompted him to write the directions for making a miniature fabric buffalo. His web, which had been labeled for sequencing his paragraphs, included both the

materials used for designing the buffalo and the steps he and his mother had used in the construction process. A photo of the buffalo accompanied this piece of writing as an exhibit in his portfolio (see Figure 5).



Figure 5 Model of Buffalo

One of the guest speakers for the unit was a student's mother who shared her family's collection of Native American artifacts. After her visit, her daughter wrote of the family's interest in Native American artifacts and how her family had acquired a turtle shell drum, spear, coup stick, birch bark and buffalo leg quivers, arrows, and buffalo skull while on vacation in Minnesota. Several bone necklaces were displayed on the bust of a brave which had been in her grandfather's office for many

decades. The student chose a photograph to accompany her piece of writing which was selected as a portfolio exhibit (see Figure 6).



Figure 6 Native American Artifact Collection

One boy wrote a story about his hunting experiences. He then created a buffalo skin from a large roll of brown paper and used symbols to depict his hunting trips much like hunters of the Cheyenne nation had done. The art instructor assisted him in wrinkling the paper and using a brown tempera wash to create the effect of a leather hide. Since the buffalo skin was too large to

fit into his portfolio, a photograph was taken and attached to his personal narration, as well as a translation of the symbols used in his written piece (see Figure 7).



Figure 7 Person Hunting Experience

A family vacation to the Black Hills of South Dakota prompted one boy to write a biography of the life of Crazy Horse, a Sioux warrior. He sent for information and also used brochures the family had gathered that summer to update the class on the progress being made on the rock sculpture of Crazy Horse. With the assistance of his father, this student created a clay model of what the Crazy Horse monument will look like when it is completed. A photograph of the model was attached to the biography selected for inclusion in his portfolio (see Figure 8).



Figure 8 Model of Crazy Horse Sculpture

Adaptation to their habitat through the use of natural resources was the topic of another student's report on the Pueblo nation. The photograph accompanying his report (see Figure 9) depicted a three-level Pueblo home made of paper mache to represent the sandstone building blocks used by these first apartment builders. The home was furnished with a ladder and had numerous clay pots. It was located in a desert habitat that

included cactus fashioned from clay and a garden of maize made from pipe cleaners and tissue paper. A pasture of sheep which was the nation's source of wool for weaving blankets and rugs was included.



Figure 9 Model of a Pueblo Home

Science: Ocean Habitat

A field trip to the aquarium at the Henry Doorly Zoo in Omaha, Nebraska, launched the students into exploring the diversity among the oceans' inhabitants and their habitats. A student chose to write a personal narration about the class field trip to the zoo. She reflected on the learning gained from the experience and expressed pleasure in having her father as a parent volunteer accompanying the class. Although she had not

constructed a web or list of ideas, her draft was well organized. She used arrows to rearrange a few sentences to develop a better sequence. She included many words associated with the concepts of the experience such as aviary, aquarium, pavilion, and chaperone. In her self-reflection statement attached to this piece as a portfolio exhibit, she stated that she was good at organizing her ideas. Her new goal was to use paragraphs. A photograph was taken of some members of the class who participated in the field trip. The photograph was attached to her writing (see Figure 10).



Figure 10 Some Members of our Class at the Henry Doorly Zoo

One girl selected for her portfolio a thank you note she had written to the parent volunteer that had accompanied her group. In her first draft, the majority of her sentences had

begun with the phrase "I liked the" In revising the note, she learned to combine ideas into a series. She also was able to vary her sentence structure and to elaborate on her personal response to the field trip. A photograph of her group in the aquarium was attached to this letter (see Figure 11).

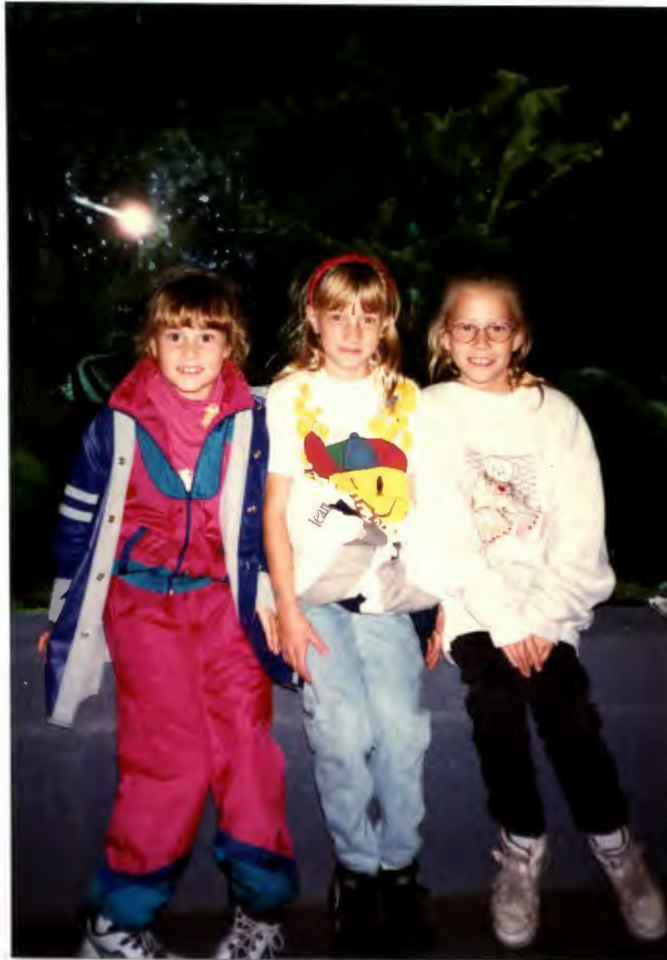


Figure 11 Our Group in the Aquarium

Upon returning from the zoo trip, the third graders purchased a pair of fiddler crabs for the classroom aquarium. As students researched about them, they categorized their facts

about the crabs into a web that was used to write a class report. The web and report became models for students to use as they researched an ocean creature of their own choosing. Using the class crab report as a model, one girl checked out numerous nonfiction books to locate information on the starfish and created a web. She listed single words and phrases on the four categories of her web. As information was used in her draft, she drew a line through the words or phrases on her web. In her self-reflection sheet attached to this report selected as a portfolio exhibit, she expressed pride in her efforts. She stated that she had learned how to transfer a web into a draft but was disappointed that her report was short. She set a goal to collect more facts for her next report. A photo that had been taken of this student observing a starfish at the aquarium accompanied her writing. She stated, "That's where I got the idea for my report" (see Figure 12).



Figure 12 Student Observing Starfish in Aquarium

She also attached a photo of the starfish that she had constructed for the tide pool section of the class mural. She had used shredded wheat to texture her construction paper starfish for a more realistic effect (see Figure 13).



Figure 13 Image of Starfish in Tide Pool Mural

Students were especially interested in whales and chose to raise money to adopt an Atlantic humpback whale named Lightning. Using photographs with grid squares drawn on them, the students were able to create large scale drawings of the whales, a seven foot three-dimensional model of Lightning and a ten-foot model of a blue whale. These models were hung from the ceiling in the classroom.

One boy chose to write the instructions for constructing a three-dimensional model of a whale. His web listed six steps, numbering them to correspond to the sequence his group had used in the construction of their model. In his self-reflection, the

boy stated that using a web had helped him do a good job of explaining the steps for making a whale model. Since the group's model was seven feet in length, a photo was taken of the humpback whale and attached to his final copy, submitted as a portfolio exhibit (see Figure 14).



Figure 14 Model of Humpback Whale

One of the girls included a photograph of the class ocean mural with a personal letter to a former classmate as a portfolio exhibit. In her letter, she described the class field trip to the aquarium, the fiddler crabs in the classroom aquarium, the building of whale models, the designing of pop-up books with shark and whale facts, and the construction of an ocean mural. A

copy of her letter with the accompanying photograph became a portfolio exhibit (see Figure 15).



Figure 15 Ocean Mural Developed by Class

Summary

As these third graders have moved on to fourth grade, it is rewarding to have several of them return to share their writing with the current third grade students. During our unit on Native Americans, the girl who had written about her family's collection of artifacts shared her piece from the third grade year along with her mother's presentation. The boy who had constructed the miniature fabric buffalo was asked to visit this year's class and share his writing about the construction of the buffalo. Likewise, the boy who had written the biography about Crazy Horse

was asked to share his report and model. Visits by former students have encouraged this year's class to pursue similar projects and to use photographs as suggestions for writing topics.

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